



Volume: 9 Issue: 2 Year: 2012

Politeness in mentor-mentee talk

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Abstract

This paper explores the issues of Politeness (Brown and Levinson, 1987) in the interaction between mentors and mentees (or students) of a tertiary learning context. It attempts to (i) investigate the use of Redressive Strategies or Face Threatening Acts (FTAs) by mentors when encountering with students who are facing both academic and disciplinary problems, (ii) how FTAs could constitute a face threat to students' positive self-image and (iii) the functions underlying Redressive Strategies or FTAs during mentor-mentee talk. The audio-taped data obtained from two academic meeting sessions between a mentor and two undergraduates respectively was transcribed and analysed based on Brown and Levinson's Framework of Politeness. The data demonstrates that the mentors had used positive politeness strategies, off-record-indirect strategies and bald-on-record strategies while interacting with their students. Additionally, Off-Record-Indirect strategies were the least attempted by the mentors and they used more FTAs on the students.

Keywords: Politeness strategies; mentor-mentee, Redressive strategies; Face Threatening Acts (FTAs).

1. Introduction

The Mentor-Mentee System (MMS) is now widely implemented in many higher learning institutions in Malaysia. Apart from giving students the chance to seek advice for academic matters, it is also served as the platform for mentors (or advisors) to have counselling sessions with students who are facing different academic or disciplinary problems. In the discussion of the nature of mentor-mentee interactions, many will examine the four categories of speech functions established among them, which comprise of reporting information, requesting information, process and encouragement (Hewitt, Reeve, Abeygunawardena & Vaillancourt, 2002). Each of these categories is concerned with the different roles played by mentors. Apart from these, 'Politeness' is another interesting perspective to explore the mutual interaction between mentors and mentees. Typically, mentors will employ different politeness strategies while interacting with their students. They are obligated to adjust the use of words to fit into different situations during the talk. This is done with

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the intention to save the hearers' 'face' (Brown and Levinson, 1987). Nevertheless, the possibility that mentors use Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs) is high and this depends on the group of students they handle.

2. The concept of Politeness

The debate of 'politeness' issue is indeed one of moral philosophy and cultural norms. The choices of words, expressions and intonations could determine the intended level of politeness by the speakers. Leech (1983) stated that some illocutions such as an offer is inherently polite and an order is deemed inherently impolite. However, Mey (1993) argued that politeness (based on Leech) is an abstract quality because expressions which are implied as inherently polite are not necessarily always being polite and it should take into account the contextual factors that may determine politeness in a particular situation.

The Brown and Levinson's framework on politeness (1987) assumes that interlocutors are 'rational agents' as they choose means which will satisfy their needs in a particular conversational situation. Thus, each interlocutor is endowed with what Brown and Levinson called 'face'. This property of 'self' is viewed as a concept primarily given or occurred during social interactions. In other words, participants (both speaker and hearer) negotiate each other's self-image or face that can be "lost, maintained or enhanced and must be constantly attended to in interaction" (Goffman, 1957 cited in Guendouzi, 2004). This public self-image concerns with the speakers and hearers' emotional and social sense that each individual expects everyone else to recognise (Yule, 1996). To conclude, politeness is employed to show awareness of another's face or self-image.

Brown and Levinson (1987) found that 'face' could occur in two forms – 'positive face' and 'negative face'. They further explained that positive face is the desire to be appreciated and valued by others, the need to be accepted and for social approval. On the contrary, negative face is the claim for certain freedoms, territory or independent of actions and imposition, and the desire to be unimpeded. Drawing on the notion of these 'faces', the theory of politeness attempts to explain that speaker choose certain strategies to protect his or her own face (either positive or negative face) and the face of others (hearer). As for this, Brown and Levinson suggested that there are four types of politeness strategies that sum up human politeness behaviour: bald-on record strategy, negative politeness strategy, positive politeness strategy and off-record-indirect strategies (using hints and metaphors).

In addition, there are certain communicative acts that speakers might use to perform what can intentionally threaten to the hearer's face. According to Rowland (1996), such Face Threatening Acts (FTAs) can be categorised according to whether they threaten negative or positive face. For instance, orders and requests threaten negative face; whereas criticism and disagreement threaten positive face. However, these threats to face can be reduced by certain strategies to give face to the addressee. These are called 'redressive strategies' (such as negative politeness strategy, positive politeness strategy and off-record-indirect strategies). Furthermore, Brown and Levinson (1987) hypothesised that the redressive strategies can be placed in a hierarchical order as follows:

1. do FTA without redressive action
2. do FTA on record with positive politeness
3. do FTA on record with negative politeness
4. do FTA off record
5. do not do the FTA

They also asserted that to look into factors determining the seriousness of an FTA, the strategies needed to reduce the risk depend on the following: the social distance between speaker and hearer; the relative power of speaker over hearer; and the ranking of the imposition of the FTA.

The use of indirect speech acts is seen generally associated with politeness. It is used with the aims to minimise insults and to save the hearers' ego. This is rather important in many situations such as in schools where counsellors or advisors have to deal with students who are having academic or disciplinary problems. Therefore, in order to avoid directly 'attack' the students which might in turn leave some negative psychological impacts on them, indirect speech acts will be used. However, some mentors might perform FTAs just to make the students to be aware immediately.

3. The concept of Politeness in relation to instructional communicative context

The Brown and Levinson's sociolinguistic theory of 'politeness' provides valuable insights to many instances in the instructional communication or particularly teacher-student interactions. In teaching, Bills (2000) stated that teachers use language not only for classroom delivery process, but also to manage interpersonal relations in a way that the 'face' needs of students will be taken care of. However, Cazden (1979) found out that teachers, by the nature of their professional role, are continually posing threats to students' face and these threats take the form of constraints on students' actions, evaluations of their actions and utterances, and interruptions of student work and talk. In addition to that, Cazden also pointed out that social distance, which is influenced by the

cultural background of both teachers and students, will determine the use of negative and positive politeness strategies.

In a study on the role of teacher-talk, Hinako (2002) also used Brown and Levinson's Model to analyze the use of directives to understand the socio-cultural context of teacher-talk. The teachers were found inevitably engaged in face-threatening acts (FTAs) which constrained students' freedom and criticized their behaviour and work. As a result, these acts will cause some degree of disappointments, disheartenment and demotivation on the students. Thus, in order to solve this problem, Hinako (2002) suggested that teachers can soften the effects of such acts by utilizing two important politeness – intimacy (positive politeness) and respect (negative politeness).

4. Research focus and methodology

The research focus of the present paper is to examine (1) whether there is evidence to suggest that mentors/ advisors tend to use more Redressive Strategies or Face Threatening Acts (FTAs) when encountering with students who are facing academic or disciplinary problems; (2) to what extent does the use of FTAs by mentors will constitute a face threat to students' positive self-image? and (3) the real functions underlying Redressive Strategies or FTAs during mentor-mentee talk.

The participants of the study consisted of four undergraduate students and two mentors (or academic advisor) from University of Selangor, Malaysia. The students were called for a discussion session with their mentors as they were facing different academic and disciplinary problems such as failing subjects, extending semester and escaping classes. The data was taken from a corpus of audio-taped recordings collected during two academic meeting sessions between the mentors and the mentees. The audio-taped data was transcribed and analysed based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) Framework of Politeness where the researcher looked into the different politeness strategies or Face Threatening Acts (FTAs) used by the mentors on the students during the conversation and to see how the students encountered or responded to those strategies.

5. Discussion of findings

5.1 The use of Redressive strategies in mentor-talk

In the two cases recorded, each mentor was talking to two students who were found facing problems in academic and disciplinary performance. Although the mentors were quite emotional throughout the session, they were still able to control the choices of words uttered. Additionally, they were also realized that the way of speaking to students could influence the students' emotion

or feeling, thus, the instances of using redressive strategies by the mentors occurred periodically in the conversation.

Off-record strategy is the safest strategy identified by Brown and Levinson (1987), and amongst the numerous ways of going off-record include giving hints and clues, under or over-stating, being ironic and using rhetoric questions. The data reveals that the mentors did attempt redressive strategies especially by giving hints and over-stating. Each of these ways relies on the students to make a conversational implicature, which is to draw conclusion about the mentor's intention.

5.2 Positive politeness strategies

As shown in Excerpt 1, when the mentor was dealing with a student who was always absent from classes, he started off by asking the reason rather than pointing out the student's fault immediately. The mentor was actually applying strategies by building a positive rapport with the student, hoping that the student would confess his wrongdoing under a relaxed condition. This could also help the student to self-reflect the problem encountered.

Excerpt 1

19	Z	:	a... I didn't come to class.
20	M	:	You didn't come to class. ok.
21	Z	:	Um...
22	M	:	Why didn't you come to class?
23	Z	:	Um...
24	M	:	Why didn't you come to class?
25	Z	:	Because...
26	M	:	Um
27	Z	:	Because I was facing problem in understanding so I just run away from the class.

(Z – student; M – Mentor)

In addition, the question – “why didn't you come to class?” (in a soft tone) was used to replace the direct attack method such as scolding (e.g.: “you can't do that!” or “why must you escape classes!”). This step was taken to avoid baldly telling student Z that he had done something which against the rules. The mentor was actually applying the positive face strategies when he recognised that the student needed respect or ‘face’ due to the existence of the third party (another student, H) in the session. Initially, student Z was reluctant to answer when the mentor asked him question for the first time. He might have mistakenly interpreted the question as an admonishment. In other words, this might due to student's common understanding that a question is often arisen in such circumstances and is normally followed by some actions (like punishment). Student Z only responded to the same question at the second time. This may be because he had recognised the

‘politeness’ strategy used by the mentor. In fact, even after the second question, he was paused for a while (“because...”) as he was still wondering the mentor’s intention. This kind of situation is obvious among students as they will only give the explicit answer towards the end. They tend to make guesses of the possible impact while answering any questions.

5.3 Off-Record-Indirect strategies

Brown and Levinson suggested the numerous ways of going off-record used in showing politeness which includes hints, clues or being ironic. This is associated with indirect speech acts where speaker avoid straight-forward way of conveying message. There is an indirect relationship between the structure used and the functions intended. Normally, the response or feedback is not solely the answer but the awareness and action of the hearer.

Excerpt 2

74	Z	:	a... I think. I fail the subject because it's my fault.
75	M	:	Your own ha. Your own reason. All of your friends have gone up to degree.
76	Z	:	I notice that.
77	M	:	Ok.
78	Z	:	I notice that.

In excerpt 2, the mentor was using ‘hint’ to make the student Z being aware of his situation. In order to avoid reminding the student that he was left behind in his study and ought to extend semester, the mentor had chosen the comparative technique by saying that “All of your friends have gone up to degree.”. There is no synchrony between this syntactic form and its illocutionary force. Although this speech act is that of a statement, but the illocutionary force is not merely stating. The mentor’s intention was actually to ask the student if he was aware of the fact that all of his friends have furthered their study at a higher level. This act could maintain the student’s ‘face’ and also make him realised his problem. From student Z’s response, it can be interpreted that the student was realised about his situation when he replied “I notice that” twice.

5.4 Face Threatening Acts without Redressive strategies

According to Brown and Levinson, politeness strategies are developed in order to save hearer’s face and this refers to the ‘respect’ that an individual has for him or herself, and maintaining that ‘self-esteem’ in public or in private situations. However, in opposition, certain speech acts will make hearers feel uncomfortable. This occurs when speaker provides no effort to minimize threats on the hearer. This is called bald-on record strategy. The following excerpts reveal several FTAs performed baldly on the students by the mentor, without any form of redressive action.

Excerpt 3

4	Z	:	Hard to understand.
5	M	:	A great reason. (sarcastically)
6	Z	:	A... Um...A... the subject is a... too complicated because many facts and a...theories.
7	M	:	Other students can do it, why can't the two of you? Do you realise that in the final, you wrote nothing inside the script.
8	Z	:	a...because a... I didn't read the book
9	M	:	come again. You didn't read the book? What is the real reason?
10	H	:	Um...
11	M	:	Ha?
12	Z	:	Because... is I don't read the book. I wouldn't understand either because um...
13	M	:	You have gone through the subject right for two semesters. You know. Don't tell me you don't, how to say, digest even a single thing from the book! Don't say the book ok. The notes then. (sign) What is the main reason actually? You all are just lazy! Very lazy!
14	Z	:	Um...
15	M	:	Um. Which part of it you feel that it's very difficult? This is the third time right you sign up for the subject. Right. This is the third time already (while checking the student record in the system). Ya. There must be something wrong with your attitude. Something seriously wrong somewhere! You know.
16	M	:	Say something.
17	Z	:	(quiet)
18	M	:	Why quiet? Ok. You cannot accept the fact that you are lazy right. Ok. Anything else? Just be honest then.
19	Z	:	(quiet)

(Z, H – students)

Excerpt 3 clearly reveals that the mentor had used several harsh words sarcastically which in turn caused some unpleasant feelings to the students. For instance, in the speech act – “A great reason.” though the syntactic form in which it was delivered was that of a declarative, it was in fact a tease to embarrass the student. As a consequence, student Z paused a few times before responding. Similarly, the question - “other students can do it why can't the two of you?” posed a strong threat to the students' ‘face’. This can be interpreted as a humiliation that both of the students were not as intelligent as the others.

In addition, the mentor turned rather emotional right after the student giving their reasons. This made him continued to reprimand their wrongdoing (for not doing revision) by asking the student sarcastically if they “didn't digest even a single thing from the book” and scolded them for being lazy in their study (“You all are just lazy! Very lazy!”). Without giving the student time to respond, the mentor went on threatening the student's face again when he was commenting on the student's attitude towards learning – “There must be something wrong with your attitude. Something

seriously wrong somewhere!” As a result, student Z turned quiet. Moreover, it was also quite obvious that the student’s face and dignity had been challenged when the mentor accused him for not being able to accept the fact of his laziness. Similarly, the student kept silent without giving any response.

5.5 Face Threatening Acts on students’ positive or negative face wants

These acts threaten the positive or negative face want, by indicating potentially that the speaker does not care about the addressee’s feelings, want, etc (Brown & Levinson, 1987). One of the ways of performing this act is by showing blatant non-cooperation in an activity, e.g. disruptively interrupting someone’s talk or showing non-attention. Thus, the speaker indicates that he or she doesn’t care about the hearer’s negative or positive face.

Excerpt 4

63	M	:	You can’t cope with her way of teaching?
64	Z	:	Because
65	M	:	(interrupting) Or she is too fast or... because of some other reasons.
66	Z	:	No, I mean
67	M	:	(interrupting) Ok, I know already. You just don’t have any interest towards learning.

Excerpt 5

126	M	:	How do you find your result?
127	S	:	Quite
128	M	:	(interrupting) Excellent?
129	S	:	No. I think it
130	M	:	(interrupting) so what is the reason? How many subjects are you repeating this semester?

(S – student)

The above excerpts show the instances where the mentor interrupting the students’ talk when they were trying to respond to the questions asked. In other words, the mentor did not show respect and consider the students’ face wants. Furthermore, he had the tendency of giving some guesses after interruptions although the students were still in the midst of responding. Besides that, as revealed in excerpt 5, the mentor was not only interfered when student S was speaking but also switched to another topic while the student was responding to the earlier matter. This shows that the mentor had loss his patient with the student or just being not interested with the student’s response.

Excerpt 6

97	M	:	You appeal to move inside the campus. Ok. Why you don't want to stay in Kuala Selangor?
98	N	:	There, I have to wake up at 6.
99	M	:	Got to wake up at 6! That is something you never did before right (laughing).
100	N	:	What I am trying to say is that I can't
101	M	:	(Interrupting) tell me your future plan.
102	N	:	ha?
103	M	:	Never mind. Forget about it. I don't think you have planned anything for your life.
104	N	:	(quiet)

(N – student)

In this example, the student's 'face' was completely threatened when the mentor teased the student's weakness (for not being able to wake up early) sarcastically with a loud laughing at the end of it. Besides the evident interruption, the mentor was actually not paying full attention to student N's response and went on asking another question. Apart from that, the data also demonstrates that before the student could actually respond to the newly asked question, the mentor already disruptively interrupted and predicted that the student never planned anything for his life.

6.0 Conclusions

The conversations examined here suggest that a wide range of politeness strategies and Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs) are being used in mentor-mentee interaction. As demonstrated in the data, the mentors had used positive politeness strategies, off-record-indirect strategies and bald-on-record strategies while interacting with their mentees. The use of positive politeness strategies was intended to build closeness between the mentors and the students. It is believed that once the relationship is established, it will become easier for them to discuss any matters. In addition, the mentors were also trying their best to avoid the use of bald-on record like scolding because it will threaten the students' face and as the consequence, they might not tell the truth. On the contrary, Off-Record-Indirect was rarely attempted by the mentors as they preferred to go about matters with a more direct approach. On the other hand, they used more FTAs on the students. This was due to their emotional state and disappointment towards the students during the session. However, the mentors' intention was not as much as to intimidate the students' self-image.

The analysis provides some implications for the construction of mentor-mentee relationship. The employment of politeness strategies, for instance, suggests that mentors have to be aware of the principles which lie between human communications where (i) the social distance between the mentor and students is quite large, (ii) the power differential between speaker and hearer is not very

great and (iii) the imposition of at least some of the FTAs performed is substantial or considerable (Bills, 2000). This study has also aimed at providing indications of the different perspectives in viewing the mentor-mentee interaction which might be achieved using the politeness framework. To conclude, the type of politeness strategies used can imply the social distance and power relations between mentors and mentees, and the imposition of FTAs.

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